

Chapter VIII

ON THE CHOICE OF LANGUAGE

THIS may be a suitable moment for speaking about two other terms which are sometimes confused because of their outward similarity, as I have found Percept and Concept to be. I mean Denotation and Connotation. Although they are not terms that belong to psychology you will meet with them frequently in books about teaching, and that you should understand them clearly is of importance in dealing with pupils. You have noticed that in speaking of classification stress was laid on the importance of naming. 'The name is the bond,' and so on. By a name we point out the several objects in a class; but when we apply a name to any object we also imply that the object possesses those qualities in virtue of which it was admitted to that class. So the same name can be used in two different ways. We saw this in the use of the word *man* in two different sentences. Take any common noun at random from a dictionary—turnip, for instance—and you will find that it has two uses. It points out an object, and it does so because that object has certain qualities. These two uses of a word are what is meant by Denotation and Connotation.

255. The word *denote* is familiar; *connote* not so common. To denote is to point out. The thing pointed out, or denoted, by a word is its *denotation*; and all objects belonging to that class of things fall under the denotation of the term. For

instance, the term 'church' applies to all churches, whatever their style of architecture. These are its *denotation*. That is simple enough; the trouble is with connotation. The easiest way to approach it may be to call it the *meaning* of the term; the notions that the word brings with it. The name 'taxi-cab' conveys to your mind a class of vehicle, plying for public hire, with very distinctive features, which I need not enumerate. These distinctive features or 'attributes' are the *connotation* of 'taxi-cab.' They are what the idea of it *includes* for us, and the word only applies to (or *denotes*) vehicles having those attributes. They have their denotation *because* they possess those attributes.

256. But the *denotation* of the term is also a *meaning*. When I say 'dog' I mean a dog, and not a cat. When I say 'taxi' I do not mean a hansom. So it comes to this, that a word—name—term*—has two kinds of meanings; its meaning for denotation and its meaning for connotation. It *denotes* an object; it *connotes* its attributes. You see, then, that *denotation* refers to *things*, and *connotation* to *qualities*. You may say, 'What has this to do with teaching?' A great deal. The connotation of a term is a personal matter; it depends on the extent and accuracy of our knowledge. My connotation of a term is its meaning for *me*; your connotation of the same term is its meaning for *you*, and you can understand that these may not be identical. They may, in fact, differ very much.

* 'Word,' 'name,' 'term' are equivalent.

257. But there is also what is called the *accepted* connotation of a term; the meaning which thinking people attach to it—a kind of dictionary meaning. Now, in teaching we may be entirely misunderstood if a word which we use has a different connotation for the pupil and for us. The term used may have for the pupil a connotation of which the teacher never dreams. For the teacher's connotation will probably be that which is the generally accepted meaning of the term, including no more and no less than that; while the pupil will have what Professor Adams calls 'a private dictionary,' a particular connotation arising out of his particular experience, which may include much more or much less than the accepted meaning.

258. Remembering this makes us careful in the choice of language. If the particular or private connotation of a term, i.e. its significance to the individual, depends on his knowledge in connection with it, it follows that as his knowledge increases the connotation of the term will change. It will mean more to him, and less. More, because he will have discovered attributes of which he was previously unaware; and less, because he will recognize which of the attributes were accidental and which are an integral part of the idea. The teacher should remember this, seeing that so much of his work aims at the increase of the pupil's knowledge and the accuracy of his notions about it.

259. Every increase in knowledge causes a change in the connotation and denotation of a

term. Take this, for example. A few years ago I gave a little grandson a toy monkey, with wheels attached to the feet, so that he could draw it about the nursery. When he was six he was taken to the Zoological Gardens, and his great desire was to see the monkey-house. When he came out he looked puzzled, and, I thought, a little disappointed. I asked, 'What is it, David? Didn't you like the monkeys?' and he answered, 'Yes, but—they haven't any wheels on their feet.' You see, his connotation of 'monkey' included wheels, and the reality had upset his mental picture. Thus 'knowledge oft brings sorrow in its train,' and in our process of instruction we no doubt administer some mental shocks of which we are unaware.

260. 'Very young children, those under six, have few, if any, general ideas of the objects with which they deal. . . . In other words, their meanings are almost entirely in *denotation*, not in *connotation*. Thus, when a young child is asked what a *chair* is, he can do no more than point to one. But if a normal child of six is asked the same question he will usually attempt some sort of definition. He will say that a chair is 'What you sit on' or some such thing. His meanings are beginning to be in *connotation* as well as in *denotation*.'—*Dumville*.

261. Now, Professor Adams points out that 'not unfrequently the teacher asks a question in connotation and gets an answer in denotation. He asks, for example, "What is a prophet?" and gets the reply, "Elijah." It is true that Elijah was a prophet, but it is clear that this is not what the teacher wants.' And I would add that not unfrequently the teacher accepts such an answer, not because it satisfies her, but because she doesn't

know what is the matter with it. If she were clear in her own mind on the subject of denotation and connotation she would, by questioning, draw some kind of definition from the child, lead him to see where his answer was amiss, and so help him to think clearly. If I asked one of you, 'What is a rondo?' I should hardly be satisfied if you whistled one.

262. A definition is very useful, but the greater part of its value is in the search for it, and if it is given to the pupil ready-made that part of its value is lost. If he works for it himself he not only remembers it better, but if its wording should slip out of his memory he knows how to find it again. Children cannot formulate a definition without help, and this is best given by questioning. The following class-lesson on the definition of a familiar object is an example. The ages of the children would average seven years.

263. TEACHER.—We are going to talk about a very common thing—a chair. We are going to ask ourselves whether we really know what a chair is. (*Smiles go round the class at such a notion.*)

TEACHER.—What is a chair?

SEVERAL CHILDREN.—Something you sit on.

TEACHER.—Can you give me one word that we could use instead of chair?

A CHILD.—A seat. (TEACHER *writes on blackboard, 'A chair is a seat.'*)

TEACHER.—Will Nellie read what I have written? (NELLIE *reads.*) Is what you are now sitting on a chair?

CHORUS.—No! It's a bench.

TEACHER.—But it is a seat. Why isn't it a chair? (*Some hesitation; then a hand goes up.*)

A CHILD.—Because there's a lot of us sitting on it.

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TEACHER.—Then what is the difference between a bench and a chair? (*A few hands raised.*) Well, Johnnie?

JOHNNIE.—Only one person can sit on a chair.

TEACHER (*adds on board, 'for one person'*).—Mary, please read what is on the board now.

MARY (*reads*).—‘A chair is a seat for one person.’

TEACHER.—Is that right?

CHORUS.—Yes.

TEACHER.—But a stool is also a seat for one person, is it not? (*After a few seconds of thinking, several hands are raised.*) Alice has something to tell me.

ALICE.—A stool hasn't a back to it.

TEACHER.—Then what is on the board is *not* quite right?

CHORUS.—No.

TEACHER.—What must I add to make it right?

(*Several suggestions, finally reduced to 'with a back.'*)

TEACHER *writes*.)

TEACHER.—Fred will read what is on the board now.

FRED (*reads*).—‘A chair is a seat, for one person, with a back to it.’

TEACHER.—I daresay you can tell me other things about chairs. (*Hands go up and children volunteer.*)

FIRST CHILD.—Daddy's chair at home has arms.

TEACHER (*writes*).—‘It has arms.’

SECOND CHILD.—Some chairs have little wheels on their legs.

TEACHER.—Yes; who knows what they are called? (*No reply.*) ‘Castors.’

THIRD CHILD.—I once saw a chair with very big wheels each side, and the man moved the wheels with his hands and it went along.

TEACHER.—That was a chair for a person who couldn't walk. (*Writes.*) ‘Large wheels.’

FOURTH CHILD.—Some chairs are stuffed all over.

TEACHER (*writes*).—‘Stuffing.’

FIFTH CHILD.—Yes, and some stuffed chairs are so big you can hardly move them.

TEACHER (*writes*).—‘Great size.’ Now let us talk about all those things you have mentioned. Is bigness necessary to make a chair a chair?

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CHORUS.—Oh no!

A CHILD.—My baby sister has a teeny weeny one.

TEACHER.—Then we may rub out size (*doing it*). Can a chair be a chair without the big wheels? (*By this time we are getting excited.*)

CHORUS.—Yes, 'course it can.

TEACHER.—Then we may rub out large wheels. Are castors necessary?

CHORUS.—No.

TEACHER.—Away go the castors. Is it still a chair if it has no arms?

A CHILD.—Not such a comfortable chair.

TEACHER.—But is it a chair?

CHORUS.—Yes.

TEACHER.—I'm afraid its arms must go, then. Now, let us see if we can rub out any more. 'With a back.' Can that come out?

CHORUS.—No.

TEACHER.—Why not?

BRIGHT PUPIL.—Because if it hadn't a back it would only be a stool.

TEACHER.—May I rub out 'for one person'?

ANSWER.—No.

TEACHER.—Why not? (*Hands up, but children cannot express themselves.*) If a seat with a back holds more than one person, what is it?

SOME CHILDREN.—A sofa. A bench.

TEACHER.—Yes, it might be a sofa or a bench. Would it be a chair?

ANSWER.—No.

TEACHER.—Now the things we rubbed out were all parts of your notion of a chair; but, you see, they were not necessary parts of a chair. They didn't matter to the chair; it could do without them. That's why we rubbed them out. We found that just what is on the board now is all that matters. You found that out yourselves. Now, children, all say after me: 'A CHAIR IS A SEAT—FOR ONE PERSON—WITH A BACK TO IT—and the other things don't matter.'

264. Do the children know any more about a

chair at the end of this lesson than at the beginning? Not a whit, but they have had a lesson in clear thinking, and an exercise of this kind now and then amply repays the time spent on it.* To be given a ready-made definition is not very interesting, but hunting for one and running it to earth is quite good fun. The moral of the tale is that the time for memorizing a definition is at the *end* of a lesson, when the ideas embodied in the lesson are quite clear, and not at the beginning.

265. In teaching the elements of music to children, definitions must be used with care. As I have said elsewhere (115), what we want at this stage is the right behaviour in response to the symbol, and we want also the power to *use* the symbol intelligently. The proof of the pudding is not so much in the eating as in the digesting; and when it is a question of musical notation the proof of the understanding is in the doing, and not in the reciting of a definition. But when the understanding has been proved by doing, a simply worded definition helps to fix the knowledge in a clear form.

266. 'Catechisms' of music and primers of the elements are of no use for teaching purposes. They are so condensed that they are practically only collections of definitions—not always good definitions either. But they can be used in other ways quite usefully. When preparing a pupil for an examination it is not a bad plan to take the

* I met with this lesson, or something like it, a very long time ago, but in what book or paper I have entirely forgotten, and cannot therefore make a direct acknowledgment of its source.

index of one of those little books and question the pupil on each point as it happens to come. If the index is good and full, this is an excellent all-round test. If your teaching has been good, you will probably find that your pupil knows most of the subject matter. Mark those points about which fuller teaching is needed, or such points as you have not yet touched on at all, and attend to these, finding the 'points of contact' with the well digested knowledge. In this way you will save your pupil's time and your own, and at the same time feel that you are not omitting anything that may be called for. A primer is also an excellent *notebook*, for reference at any time, and may be used by the pupil in this way, while the knowledge itself has been gained in quite another.